The Score of War: A haunting documentary film on Ukraine

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The German television station RBB recently screened the documentary film *The Score of War—Living Between the Front Lines* by Mark Chaet, Tom Franke and Armin Siebert in the worst timeslot imaginable—midnight. Anyone hoping to find the film later in the station's video library would be disappointed. The film, however, should not be ignored.

In April 2015, Ukrainian violinist and composer Mark Chaet, accompanied by a small camera crew from Berlin, where Chaet has lived since the mid-1990s, set out for Eastern Ukraine. His former home now lies at the heart of the civil war, where the border between pro-Western and pro-Russian supporters runs. He was alarmed when his friends phoned again and again to say the war had changed them greatly. Had they turned into fanatics?

After more than 20 years, he stands across from his cousin Olga in the Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk. She lives in a state of helpless fear. Earlier, says Olga, she had been able to talk about war. The old Soviet woman had read a lot and seen old Soviet as well as new films on the Second World War. It was something else entirely to experience war: the fighting close by, the checkpoints and barricades, burned out buses and, worst of all, the bombs. Amid sudden detonations, understanding nothing, one lives like a mouse.

An old school friend, Roman, now a lecturer at the Academy for Mechanical Engineering, seems his usual self. Like many others, according to Roman, he ignores the war as soon as the shooting stops. But he has found that he always plans a way through the city with his young daughter so that they never require more than 10 seconds to get to safety. The city is a death zone, according to Mark's first violin teacher. Many have fled, much has been destroyed.

The film is haunting precisely because it does not show the war in images of fighting, but in its overarching influence on civilian life—one could say, in its civilian totality.

The bewilderment of Mark and his colleagues at the ubiquity of death in everyday life is powerfully palpable. To experience the loss of any sense of safety is a decisive turning point. The war dominates everything, even the silence. This aspect of the film is very convincing.

The conservatory of the modern industrial city of Donetsk, where Mark studied violin, has hardly changed since his departure. But now the path for students is life-threatening. Like other state employees, Mark's former violin teacher works without payment ever since Kiev stopped paying salaries. Local public transport and city sanitation workers, as well as the philharmonic musicians, are all anxious to keep normal civilian life going as long as they can. Thanks to the admirable dedication of a young conductor, concert and opera performances are prepared.

It is generally thought that when the cannons roar, the muse has to remain silent, says the concertmaster of the Prokofiev Philharmonic. He is not of that opinion. It is now more than ever that art helps people to survive. Unlike the days before the war, people come up to thank the musicians after a concert. As Mark's former teacher interprets Bach for the camera crew—demonstrating the unifying power of world culture—a youth violin ensemble on Kramatorsk's other front plays the global hit "My Way" with abandon.

It is a moving scene. The camera carefully pans across the faces of the children as they concentrate. Then their teacher comes into the frame. It is the same teacher from whom Mark learned to play his first notes on the violin. Mark also frequently reaches for his instrument, a friendly traveller between the frontlines of the war.

The Donetsk violin professor is stunned that the Ukrainian army fires on a part of its own country with artillery and mortars. One should have agreed about a certain autonomy, so that money stayed in the region and not everything flowed into the capital. It sounds familiar. All over the world, declining social conditions are leading to regional tensions.

An old colleague of Mark's, a theatre director in the industrial city of Sloviansk, where fierce battles took place in 2014, discusses a production; 90 percent of the entire conflict is stirred up artificially, the population of the city has been deliberately divided. A woman in Donetsk, who telephoned her brother in Western Ukraine, says it is clear that this is a war about money. It is not Ukraine fighting

against Ukraine, it is the oligarchs fighting each other. She is neither a friend of Yanukovych nor the Party of Regions nor the Communist Party. But that was peacetime. Now one does not know who is in power, and it is war.

The most tragic moment in the film is the image of an 85-year-old woman in the midst of destroyed houses on the outskirts of Donetsk. She must have been a young child when Hitler's army invaded the USSR and committed barbaric war crimes in Western Ukraine, her old homeland. The war has returned. She sits, petrified. The final images show Kramatorsk. The large monument to Lenin shown repeatedly in the film is no longer standing. On the empty pedestal, the flag of the Right Sector has been planted, the party notorious for its commitment to the traditions of the fascist Nazi party. How could it come to this?

For all of the film's protagonists, the war came as a surprise. Mark, who initially looks on the destroyed homes on the outskirts of Donetsk like a film set, repeatedly poses naïve-sounding questions: What do they feel when bombs begin falling? He declares categorically that war is incomprehensible if one does not experience it. There is no good or evil. On both sides people hold to their truths. Later he admits to having believed the EU propaganda in Germany, about the people in the former Soviet republic, thinking: These poor fellows did not know anything, one would have to help the poor wretches (he mimics the condescending tone). Now he senses a substantial gap in his understanding.

Many who, like Mark, left the former USSR during the 1990s experienced the breakup of the Soviet Union in the "West" as a liberating break with a hopeless, mendacious past. In the best case, one adopted an ironic stance toward the heritage of the Soviet Union. Flanked by Balkan-Beat and "Russendisco" party music, one swam confidently on the ideological wave of the Eastern expansion of the EU. Now it has suddenly become apparent that the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of capitalist relations have not led to prosperity, freedom and democracy, but to war.

The present impasse is reflected in the vague prognoses made by the film's protagonists. No one has turned into a fanatic, but what a fierce discussion there would be if they all sat down together at a table.

Vladimir, the defender of Ukrainian capitalism, sees economic recovery coming "through work," if necessary without "our partners in Europe and America". While he praises the Ukrainian army, which he said ensures stable conditions, the violin teacher from the same city indicates that it is now dangerous to criticize Ukrainian politics. A young patriotic singer from Donetsk dreams of the fall of all national borders. His older colleague, audibly influenced by Soviet singer Vladimir Vysotsky, says pragmatically: "First, the current situation must come to an end, then we'll see what's next." There has been a complete break between Vladimir and his cousin living in Russia since his cousin declared: "We won't let Ukraine be ruled by NATO." In contrast, Roman's parting words to Mark are, "We need a window into Europe."

The last two statements in the film are the only ones which directly articulate that there is more at stake in this conflict than a regional dispute. The fact that the film never addresses the active participation of the US and Germany in the Ukrainian coup is a real weakness. After all, Obama's assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, Victoria Nuland, secured $5 billion for the opposition against Yanukovych and the German government also supported the opposition, to which the declared fascist party of Svoboda belongs.

If Mark Chaet says these matters are very "multifaceted," he should also consider that a clarification of these facts would be an important first step. One has the impression that one or another protagonist is not free from illusions. For example, when Roman says to Mark, "Help us," adding, with a glance in the direction of the German government, "Give us this chance."

The war has shaken people, including Mark. He returned to Donetsk in May where his Symphony No. 1, inspired by the disturbing effects of his first trip, was premiered and greeted with a standing ovation. Like the film, it is dedicated to ordinary people on both sides of the front. An excerpt broadcast on Germany's MDR station sounds promising. It is perhaps not an accident that, in part, it recalls the sound of Shostakovich, the world renowned composer of the Leningrad Symphony. One hopes Mark Chaet's work will soon be heard in Germany and in other countries.